

Research Article



Beyond the shelter, one finds care: Queer kinship and communality in Dutch squats

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The Netherlands has often been associated with being the squatting paradise of Europe. The practice of squatting has been culturally embedded within Dutch society since the 1960s, when the movement started gaining popularity as a direct solution to cater to one's own housing needs and as a way to create fairly distributed and sustainable urban environments (Vasudevan, 2017). Another association with squats within the Netherlands is their increasing use as a solution to deal with the struggles stemming from a progressively harsh nationwide housing crisis (Hochstenbach, 2024), wherein an increasing number of people experience housing-related struggles and exclusion from the housing market. Squatting has always been a way to perpetrate subcultural waves and self-organization in parallel of being a grassroots contestation towards the housing crisis in the Netherlands (Pruijt 2013).

The initial accessibility and popularity of the practice within the country made squatting not only a possible life choice but also an accessible housing solution for those experiencing systemic housing hardships and communal exclusion, which commonly affect queer communities (Ward, 2022). However, with the introduction and legitimization of the *Antikraak* ("anti-squat") legislation in the early 2010s by the Dutch government that criminalized squatting empty properties (Dadusc, 2014), squatters are witnessing more active repression, stigmatization, and difficulties.

Within this context, this paper uses feminist perspectives on care to situate queer squatters' experiences and roles as both inhabitants and caretakers of their self-organized spaces within the squatting movement in the Netherlands. A feminist notion of care entails its understanding as being actively-produced emotional and physical labor that challenges unjust, mainstream distributions of care through the formation of community-based care networks (Alam & Houston, 2020; De La Bellacasa, 2012). Drawing on data collected through interviews with individuals involved in the Dutch squatting scene, this work explores how squats are not only a solution to housing precarity but are also sites of belonging, queer identity formation, and mutual care. In turn, the paper contributes to existing research such as Alexander Vasudevan's (2017) work on squatting, Hillier and Bunten's (2020) research on housing, and adds on a queer perspective to Alam and Houston's (2020) work on infrastructures of care through a feminist lens by centralizing queer voices, labor, and care within Dutch squats, focusing mainly on women and non-binary people. The paper also highlights the contradictions that arise when spaces like squats are also spaces for the reproduction of power structures that queer communities and squatting aim at dismantling.

Methodology

The data for this paper was collected through thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted online. Using a snowballing method via Whatsapp and Instagram groups, I got in contact with individuals who have current or past experiences of living in squats in the Netherlands and who were comfortable talking about their experiences on queerness within the squatted environment. The interviews focused on how care is practiced and how the squats act as spaces of care for queer communities. No age or gender requirements were needed, not only to allow participants to feel comfortable without

having to explicitly comply with gender norms, but also to respect their privacy. The thirteen participants self-identified as FLINTA (Female, Lesbian, Intersex, Non-binary, Transgender, Agender). Six participants have lived in smaller, housing-focused squats, and the remaining seven participants lived or currently live in bigger squats that function as both a housing solution and a space for cultural practices. All interviewees are given pseudonyms to protect their privacy, and no squats are geographically identified to ensure the safety of the participants, as squatting is currently criminalized in the Netherlands.

The Dutch squatting scene was chosen for two main reasons: for the societal and cultural relevance of squatting within the country, and for my personal interest and past involvement within the Dutch squatting scene. My engagement with the Dutch squatting community was shaped through three years of residence in the south of the Netherlands while I completed my bachelor's degree, during which time I got close to the local squatting scene. My bachelor's thesis tied to these connections by exploring the effects of gentrification-related legislation on the local squatting community. I further focused on analysing squats as infrastructures of care through the eyes of queer individuals within my master's thesis. The data gathered for my thesis research project is also used to contribute to this paper.

Background

The Netherlands has been embedded within European history as one of the focal locations of development for the squatting movement. Squatting in the Netherlands started in the 1970s, focusing on occupying vacant urban spaces to deal with the already present system of housing hardship (Pruijt, 2003; Vasudevan, 2017). The squatting movement closely developed alongside local alternative subcultures, intersecting with punk culture in the 1990s and highlighting squats as spaces of subcultural proliferation and communal aggregation (Burgum & Vasudevan, 2023). In terms of aims, Dutch squatting is the manifestation of a political act, an action for social justice and access to housing when it is deemed inaccessible, a way to resist gentrification and degradation by reclaiming vacant buildings, and a materialization of the need for subcultural spaces (Pruijt, 2013). Squatted spaces in turn embody a “counter-strategy of spatialization” (Pages, 2024, p. 69), breaking binary divisions between exclusion and inclusion of marginalized categories of individuals that are often produced by cities and urban infrastructures. However, from the early 2000, the country experienced an increasingly authoritarian political tendency, paired with media campaigns that portrayed squatters as a threat to the values of the Dutch society (Dadusc, 2014). This led to increasing political antagonism towards squatters, which resulted in the criminalization of the movement through the *Antikraak* legislation in 2011 (Dadusc, 2014). Nonetheless, the criminalization did not put a halt to the movement: Dutch squatters continued to challenge the mainstream housing system by reclaiming vacant spaces that welcomed subculture and dissidence from mainstream urban norms.

Existing literature on the topic predominantly focuses on squatting as an anti-capitalist resistance movement through the reclamation of unused urban space in the face of a worsening housing crisis (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014; Vasudevan, 2017). The rejection of

capitalist control for the creation of self-organized environments is emphasized by Graeber (2004, p.18) alongside mutual aid and collective ownership (Graeber, 2004). Squatting also emerges as an alternative form of tenure for individuals who have experienced marginalization within systems of mainstream housing provisioning.

Yet, this literature does not give enough space to the consideration of social dynamics happening within squatted spaces, particularly in the context of queer communities and identities. Scholars like Marocco (2023), Bain and Podomere (2021), and Pages (2024) show how queer communities navigate inclusion and marginalization in urban environments that often fall outside of mainstream narratives.

In turn, including queer experiences within our understanding of squatting entails considering how normative structures, such as patriarchal urban and housing infrastructure, are embedded in queer experiences of housing, and how squatting emerges as an active solution for queer communities. Urban planning is recognized as being commonly carried out within a framework of heterosexualization of space and being supported by legislative patterns of 'normality', often reinforcing heteronormative social situations as standard and common practice (Brown, 2009; Hillier & Bunten, 2020). This directly impacts the way in which housing is thought through: the amounts of rooms in a house, the way they are arranged, and the overall functions of the environment cater to the needs of and are easily allocated to heterosexual families with kids, leaving behind the needs of singles, but mainly queer individuals, either with or without a family (Barrett, 2015; Beebejaun, 2017; Hillier & Bunten, 2020).

As a result, the common association of home with the heterosexual family (Barrett, 2015; Beebejaun, 2017) highly influences the way in which housing is understood and experienced. The process of finding a home, for instance, can be challenging for queer individuals due to expected compliance to heteronormative standards imposed by mainstream housing provision (Ward, 2022). Furthermore, increasing urban austerity, economic hardship, and reduction of social welfare make these challenges even more complex, affecting availability, prices, and regulations of the housing sector (Jupp, 2017). Jupp (2017) recognizes this austerity as being gendered, as the major impact of austerity policies falls specifically on women and other marginalized categories, such as the queer community (p. 351). As housing precarity is a direct "consequence of structural marginalization" (England, 2022, p. 3), homelessness and other forms of housing precarity are shared experiences within the queer community, and, as such, they need to be met with adequate solutions.

Squats, as alternative forms of tenure, emerged as possible solutions to these multiple institutional barriers to the queer community's ability to access affordable housing and housing services. The queer community often relies on semi-formal and informal housing and community initiatives to obtain necessary resources, emotional care, and support, to initiate community welfare in an independent way (Marocco, 2023). Within urban settings, queer networks are intrinsically connected to autonomous spaces, contrasting the inequalities that stem from urban hardships and housing precarity through sociopolitical action, and offering community-managed responses to needs that are not met by

mainstream infrastructures (Bain & Podmore, 2021). Additionally, squats are spaces that provide safety for intersectional identities, creating a safe(r) environment for gender non-complying individuals through mutual aid and care (Pages, 2024). The creation of an environment that is aligned with queer positionalities allows for the creation of encounters, which, other than making the space more heterogeneous and inclusive, starts the formation of community ties and initiates care processes (Di Felicianantonio, 2017; Pages, 2024). Squats can furthermore become spaces of “embodied solidarity” (Pages, 2024, p. 71), creating an environment in which queer people can express their gender and sexual identity without fear of discrimination or exclusion (Pages, 2024).

Thus, squats are not only about housing; they are spaces where care practices and connections enable the co-creation of space, making the squat a place that fits both individual and communal needs, other than a mere shelter. Feminist scholars, such as De La Bellacasa (2012) engage with the topic of care through its recognition as active, relational work (p. 198). Care is constituted by actions of active labor, intended both as physical and emotional, which maintain the individual and its environment (De La Bellacasa, 2012). A feminist understanding of care also sees care actions as being focused on addressing unjust situations, for example through questioning mainstream infrastructures of care provision (Alam & Houston, 2020). Care is a form of often under-recognized and under-retributed labor, carried out largely by marginalized groups (De La Bellacasa, 2012). Nonetheless, care is seen as a means of individual and community survival for marginalized identities, mainly when embedded within an urban environment that has increasingly exclusionary tendencies (Alam & Houston, 2020). Taking into consideration the lens of feminist and queer theories on care, squats can be seen as environments in which there is a divergence from mainstream and normative infrastructures of care relationships, instead forming grassroots networks of care and alternative kinship. Other than overcoming their understanding as a sole housing solution, reframing squats through feminist care lenses also allows for an alternative understanding of and significance to care. Care’s interpersonal and spatial nature in squats is showcased through the customization of squatted environments depending on needs, communal emotional support, and the creation of environments rooted in intentionality and acceptance. This frames my feminist understanding of care as crucially paired with active involvement, enabling the co-creation of space through practices of care.

Analysis

1. Housing solution and communal safety

For many queer individuals involved in the Dutch squatting movement, squats have represented not only a solution to a nationwide systemic housing exclusion, but also spaces of personal safety and communal kinship. Several interviewees (Erin, Nico, Quilia, Theo) recall how their involvement with the squatting movement was initially driven by a housing need. Squatting, in their case, would have presented a solution, even if unsure and impermanent, within the Dutch housing crisis or towards the country’s restrictive

immigration procedures. However, for them, squats function beyond being spaces for mere existence within the urban environment. Instead, squats become spaces of queer identity development, communality, and interpersonal care. Quentin and Erin emphasized that squatting presented an alternative to mainstream housing provision, which was often unflexible, allocated in a discriminatory and heteronormative way, and deeply tied to capitalist structures. Theo highlighted that living within a squat allowed them to exist within a kind of environment that aligned with their values of anticapitalism and communal effort. Quentin reinforced the role of their squat as a safe environment for two trans residents who needed shelter. Erin followed up on the same discourse, affirming that “a lot of people just need a place to be in, and not to be asked anything or not to be expected anything”, a kind of environment often missing within mainstream housing solutions.

Other interviewees, such as Meike and Nico, opened up about the feelings of affirmation and acceptance provided by their squats. In these environments, non-homonormative forms of queerness were not only shown but also accepted, which allowed them to explore their own queer identity safely, which Quentin described as “a very safe space for queer people to be”. This safety was often reinforced by community structures that made Hugo and Konrad feel like they could exist without the need to justify or explain their identity, enhancing the value of queerness within an environment that did not carry judgment. Overall, squats are seen as spaces of understanding for queer people, which adds to their meaning as housing solutions. Squats gain significance as spaces of aggregation and acceptance, enhancing the provision of emotional and physical safety.

2. Spaces of emotional and spatial caretaking

In addition to being a housing solution open to their identities, squats also functioned as vital infrastructures of care for the interviewees. Squatters, through the establishment of interpersonal care relationships, foster an environment that allows for autonomy, emotional and spatial safety, and care. Floris tackled this directly, seeing care as an action done towards reaching a level of self-reliance through emotional support provided personally or within a wider communal network, as “[care] goes beyond the physical health: it goes towards the emotional health and organizational [skills] most definitely.” Similarly, Peter recognized the value of a communal attitude open to negotiation, seeing it as a common trait presented by queer squatters. Through communication, patience, and the recognition of others’ needs, care becomes an exchange. This complies also with the squat’s rejection of institutional and rigid hierarchies often present within institutionalized care relationships. Regarding this, Peter affirmed that “I feel that care represents the ability to be together, and all the ways that can look like it. I think it represents this patience and this willingness to change, to work on something, to check in on each other and to know what we need.”

Aside from the emotional sustenance, caring for the space itself carried a strong meaning for queer squatters. Through the interviewees’ perspectives, squats become spaces where emotional labor, communality, and the upkeeping of the physical space constitute a collective ethic of mutual support. Erin emphasized the value of collaboration within

maintenance and spatial caretaking: for them, care entailed the creation of physical environments where individuals can exist without expectations or judgment, reflected in shaping the facilities of the squat to their physical needs. Kim recognized that mutual help in maintaining the environment in a good state is crucial for the individual and the community; Lily and Quentin considered the communal sharing of practical skills essential within the squat, as they are necessary to adapt and personalize the squat's infrastructure. Overall, it can be noted that care practices are extended not only to the residents of the squat but also to the maintenance and preservation of the physical space itself. The interviewees recognize queer squatters as being sorts of caretakers of their surroundings and community, acting in line with a feminist approach on care due to their intentionality and efforts towards inclusivity. Through the maintenance and reparation of their collective space, queer squatters are able to transform the squat into a space that enables practices of care between them. In addition, squatting itself could be seen as a caretaking practice in the city, as the efforts made by squatters in maintaining the physical space allow for structural preservation, other than prolongation of the life of unused urban spaces through their spatial care practices.

3. Queering subculture through spaces of informed care

The subcultural dimensions of queer squatters' experiences also need to be highlighted, mainly within longer-standing and bigger squats. Many interviewees talked about events that were organized in their squats and were specifically aimed at queer audiences. For Peter, the physical infrastructure of the squat, paired with its rejection of capitalistic values, made it possible to create events that were queer-specific, filling a gap within the city's broader events schedule, also mentioned by Konrad and Nico. Some of these events, for example, are drag shows, described as a "core memory" by Peter; queer parties, as Konrad, Hugo and Luka recall, ranging from gender-affirming surgery fundraisers to queer punk events; or periodic community meetings for transgender individuals, which were experienced by Nico as being moments of communality and connection. These gatherings were felt as acts of queer care: as they were organized with mindfulness, they served almost as large-scale emotional sustenance for the local queer community. Furthermore, these events were planned to form intentional safe spaces, carving out environments adaptable to queer needs that are often lacking within the mainstream cultural scene. Queer-centered initiatives were focused on protecting each other, establishing a communal feeling of belonging, and reclaiming the squatted space not only as autonomous, yet also as queer.

However, the emotional labor towards mindfulness and safety behind these events is also recognized as being very gendered. In Kim's eyes, "the queer people in this [squat] end up doing a lot of emotional labor as opposed to physical labor [...]. I think that it's a shame, I wish that we could balance these skills a little bit better, but it's hard, it's hard to undo centuries of hierarchy." For instance, Luka pointed out that queer squatters were the ones concerned with establishing guidelines to create reciprocal safety within the organization, often working against a cis-male-dominated mentality that emphasized individualism instead. Before those queer events happened, "we would never have our own spaces, or

own parties, our own organizations,” Konrad echoes, affirming that queers are the ones who understood the difference between nominal ‘safe spaces,’ and spaces intentionally created through infrastructures of solidarity and care. These purposeful kinds of safe spaces are also characterized by “knowing that there’s always going to be someone [queer] there, because we are filling the places, and taking part to things in the squats, and talking, making, and creating, meeting or making our own parties, and just making the people see that we are here and we are not going anywhere. Because for me, it was sharing this space with [a queer person] what made me feel secure and safe in there, because it was someone that I trusted, [...] and it was someone that would know me,” Konrad adds. Ultimately, the presence of queer identities within squatted environments not only exists statically, it actively redefines them. The cultural vitality of queerness opens up the squat to a broader queer audience, using intentionality to generate subcultural spaces that resist gentrification and allow acceptance and self-expression for the community.

4. Tensions and contradictions

While squats can function as spaces of queer care and communality, many of the interviewees still experienced situations of tensions and contradictions. A reoccurring concern, expressed to a different degree by every participant, is the persistent reproduction of patriarchal structures within squatted spaces. Despite the ideological position of breaking down hierarchies and allowing anarchist value-driven co-living to flourish, many pointed to the dominance of cis-male figures reproducing skill-based and gender heteronormative hierarchies, particularly within topics of physical construction and maintenance, spatial caretaking, and negotiation of space, marginalizing the contributions from FLINTA individuals. Despite the growing number of queer folk within the squatting scene; a contrasting, reoccurring, and noticeable ‘macho’ culture, as defined by Theo, still exists within squatting environments. Peter contrasted this “tough guy” behavior by describing an increasingly stronger ethos of care and inclusion in their own squat, emphasizing that newer squats inhabited by younger individuals often have the tendency to actively resist tendencies of toxic masculinity. However, participants like Kim denoted the burden of this continuous emotional labor that comes from dealing with systems of toxic, individualistic masculinity, stating that “I felt like I was giving, giving, giving and not receiving anything; I was also going through a lot in my life, [...] and that combined with living in a [squat] without heating or warm water, with a lot of people who are also mostly not as caring or emotionally intelligent as one would need, it just made it very difficult.” As it is recognized as being mainly carried out by queer individuals, emotional work is often undervalued or not seen, causing exhaustion and burnout that affect both the community and the individual.

Other issues concern the actual physical dimension of the space, as Lily pointed out: the squat often lacks formal infrastructural components that could potentially be crucial for other queer individuals, forming considerable issues for those with medical needs – such as transgender folk after surgery.

These issues, even when frequent, are still met with efforts aimed at dimming the

challenges, as queer individuals are more present in squats, skills are being shared more, issues regarding accountability are brought up and discussed, and residents aim to share the weight of emotional labor more and more (Quilia, Theo, Kim). Kim mentioned that the issues are increasingly exposed and tackled, as “the queer community is taking up more space and also advocating for taking care of themselves, also really confronting the fact that there’s still a super patriarchal culture in the squatting scene. There’s been a lot more pushback against cis[gender] men who take up a lot of space [...] and I think that now there’s a lot more conversation about holding these men accountable for their actions.”

Conclusion

In summary, squatting in the Netherlands becomes praxis for queer individuals who experience housing-related hardships that are produced by a lack of institutional infrastructures. Within squats, queer individuals seek space that fosters community and housing support, with an autonomy-seeking mindset that focuses on mutual care and on rejecting the conception of queerness through mainstream understanding and homonormativity. The presence of non-homonormative identities within squats allows for the formation of inclusive networks and communities that go beyond a strict categorization of queerness, giving space for non-conforming identities to develop and thrive. Beyond shelter, squats offer emotional and communal safety to the queer community, yet these functions need upkeep by a community that takes care of their environment both physically and emotionally, which often falls on the shoulders of queer individuals. In this way, queer squatters often fulfill the role of caretakers: taking responsibility for the emotional well-being of others, adapting the space to their needs, organizing events aimed at queer crowds.

Overall, living in a squat is thus intertwined with care work, constantly shaping the environment through acts of physical and emotional investment. Following a feminist mindset, squats can be understood as spaces that fit the residents’ needs through active engagement in everyday practices of care (De La Bellacasa, 2012). These care practices hold a position of centrality within the experiences of queer squatters, focusing their queer care framework on intentionality and mutuality. Queer care is also focused on the production of safe spaces within squats to allow the physical, psychological, and communal needs of queer identities to be met. For these aims to succeed, queer squatters also challenge cis-centered hierarchies within their environments and within the broader squatting scene, recognizing how gender structures and skill-based hierarchies often prevent care that is to be performed and taken responsibility for equally.

The cultural, political, and care-centered significance of the queer squatting experience lies not only in its existence and affirmation but also in its continuous negotiation within power dynamics, taking up space, and cultivating care without assuming it. The presence of queer, mainly FLINTA folk within the squatting scene establishes the community’s willingness to go beyond the cis-man-dominated formation of skill hierarchies, transforming the space into inclusive and truly community-organized environments. When researching squats, engaging with a queer positionality allows us to go beyond understanding squatted spaces as mere spaces of urban contestation. Through queer

experiences, squats can be seen as environments for queer safety, care, and autonomy, despite the tensions and contradictions that nonetheless persist within the environment.

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Cover Image Description: *Kim's bedroom in the squatted building they call home*

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Maya Borean holds a Master's degree in Urban Studies from Malmö University, through which she consolidated an interest in grassroots urbanism and alternative tenure. Throughout her Master's, her research focused on squatting, urban vacancy and guardianship, collective city-making, and care relationships between individuals and their spaces. She is open to developing these topics further through future research, academic engagement, and collaborations.

Her master's thesis explores the ways in which squats in the Netherlands function as infrastructures of care. It further considers how this allows queer squatters to engage in communal and reciprocal care practices, while also reflecting on how the temporalities of squats influence interpersonal and spatial care relationships.

Throughout her research, Maya keeps an interdisciplinary and multifaceted methodological approach. Spanning from topics such as urbanism to socio-political theory, she uses qualitative foundations enriched by less conventional methodologies, such as zine-making and photo-elicitation.